



The Parthenon: The History of Ancient Athens' Most Famous Temple

Charles River Editors

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“What I would prefer is that you should fix your eyes every day on the greatness of Athens as she really is, and should fall in love with her. When you realize her greatness, then reflect that what made her great was men with a spirit of adventure, men who knew their duty, men who were ashamed to fall below a certain standard. If they ever failed in an enterprise, they made up their minds that at any rate the city should not find their courage lacking to her, and they gave to her the best contribution that they could.” – The Funeral Oration of Pericles, quoted by Thucydides

The Acropolis, which literally means “a city on the heights,” is a citadel whose currently surviving structures were mostly built during the 5th century BCE. in honor of Athena, the patron goddess of Athens. It functioned as a sacred precinct that contained the city’s most important religious and municipal structures, many of which have remained relatively intact for over 2,000 years. The Propylaea (the gateway to the Acropolis), the Parthenon (the principal shrine to the goddess), the Erechtheion (a shrine that supposedly houses the burial grounds of mythical Athenian kings), and the Temple of Athena Nike all survive to this day, and for these reasons, the Acropolis is perhaps the definitive and most eloquent expression of classical architecture, if not of the classical form itself.

Naturally, like many other works of its type and influence, the structures on the Acropolis embody certain traditions, but they also depart from some traditions and also transformed others. Indeed, just as the Acropolis is Athens’ most striking feature, it is also a perfect representative of the city’s golden age, both in terms of classical style and civilization as a whole. It’s no wonder that people continue to view the Acropolis as both a portal to antiquity but also a spot with living structures whose importance continues to reverberate to this day.

The architectural complex on the Athenian Acropolis is universally acclaimed as one of the most outstanding achievements of Western Civilization, but within that group of iconic buildings there is no doubt that the Parthenon is the most famous and impressive. The Doric and Ionic forms that are the basis of classical architecture, and as applied to the Parthenon, still resonate in the modern world today, as it has done throughout the centuries since its completion. It was built to the highest possible standards at the time, and no expense was spared on either the constituent parts or its decoration.

Of course, given the care and the costs, people have inevitably wondered why the Athenians put so much treasure and effort into the construction of this masterpiece, and why the temple still has such an impact on those who see it today. To fully understand this most beautiful and subtle of buildings it is necessary to contextualize its construction and its use within the Athenian religious tradition. The Parthenon has to be seen from numerous perspectives, including its historical context, its mathematical sophistication, and the myths and legends told in its sculptures and friezes. Ultimately, however, the Parthenon has to be recognised

for what it was at the time, not only as a place of worship but a celebration of a momentous victory over a mighty foreign power, linked to a conscious glorification of Athens as a “cosmopolis”. There is no ambiguity; the temple was the deliberate articulation of Pericles’ vision of Athens at the height of all its glory.

The Parthenon: The History of Ancient Athens’ Most Famous Temple looks at the history of the famous building, from its construction to its use. Along with pictures depicting important people, places, and events, you will learn about the Parthenon like never before.

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